

What young people think about free access to fitness facilities to support their mental health

Members of the South Australian Student Representative Council (SA SRC) want South Australian high school students to be granted free access to swimming pools, gyms, leisure centres and fitness classes.

Finding ways to support young people's efforts to manage their mental health and wellbeing should be a priority for every level of government and those within the local community who have the capacity to adapt their business models to better meet the financial conditions and capacity of high school students to pay for sports and fitness memberships and classes.

The links between physical activity, social connection, and good mental health are well proven. Providing free access to sports and fitness facilities would support young people to better manage their mental health and wellbeing, while they complete their final years of school.

Getting active and interacting with others helps young people maintain good mental health and assists them in managing the symptoms associated with mental illness,

such as depression and anxiety, which are more prevalent among young people in high school. Every young person deserves access to spaces in which they can be physically and socially active, regardless of their financial situation, or where they live.

The prohibitive cost of accessing fitness facilities within students' local community presents a particular barrier to their capacity to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. Free access to fitness facilities would provide opportunities to engage in regular fitness activities and enjoy the benefits this would bring through establishing exercise routines and fitness habits that may then become lifelong. Being able to access a local gym or swimming pool, or to participate in a professional fitness class or sporting activity at no cost, would also send the message that high school students are seen, welcomed and supported by their local community.

Members of the SA SRC Fitness for Free campaign acknowledge much more needs to be done to support young people with mental health challenges. Removing the cost barrier to participation in fitness and other sport activities is one positive step that governments and local businesses could take to practically support high school students be more fit and active.

About the SA SRC

The SA SRC is an initiative of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, supported by the Foundation for Young Australians. The 2024 SA SRC cohort comprises 150 students from 80 schools representing 44 South Australian electorates.

The Year 10, 11, and 12 students, drawn from across the state, work together to create genuine, student-led change within their communities. The SA SRC brings together passionate young people who want to create a better future for themselves and for future generations of South Australians.

About the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*, the Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates at a systemic level for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. The work of the Commissioner is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and informed by the experiences and issues of South Australian children and young people themselves.

What we did

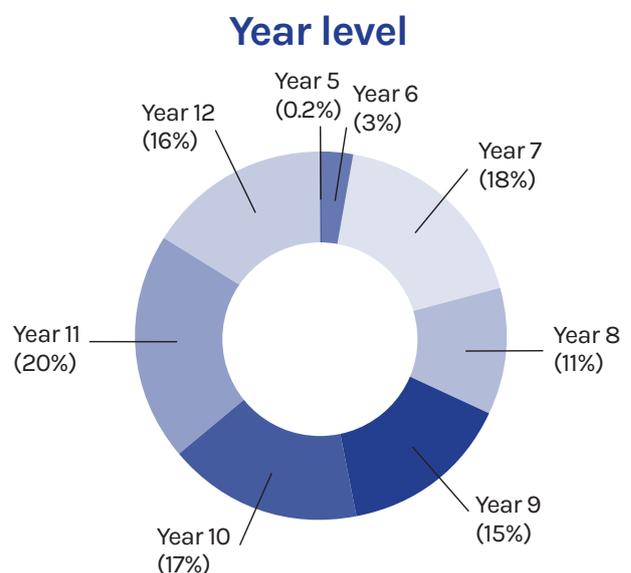
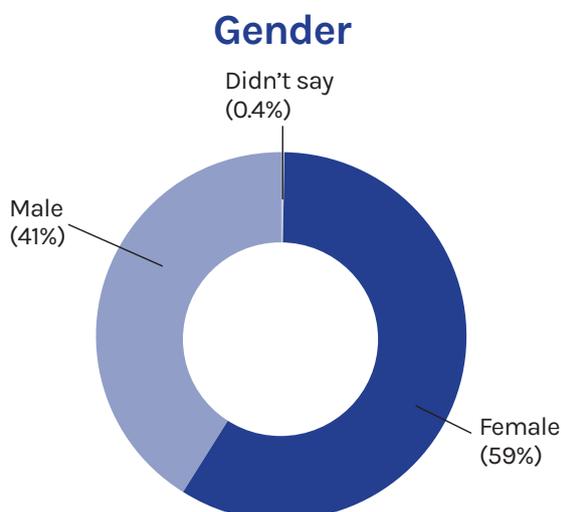
To ensure the Fitness for Free campaign is representative of young people across the state, SA SRC members distributed a poll at schools throughout South Australia between March and May 2024.

Students in Years 7-12 were asked about their current access to fitness places and their levels of participation in sport.

They were asked to share their thoughts on what they would like more access to, what makes it difficult for them to participate in fitness activities, and how having greater access to fitness facilities would help their mental health and physical wellbeing.

Who responded?

A total of 617 students from 18 secondary schools across South Australia responded to the poll, representing all three school sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent). Schools were located in 13 local government areas, and responses came from students in various year levels and with different genders.



What access do young people have to sports and fitness activities and facilities?

Almost half (47%) of all students who participated in the SA SRC poll play club sport 'very often', and one quarter (26%) play school sport 'very often'. It was more common (35%) for students to report playing school sport 'sometimes'.

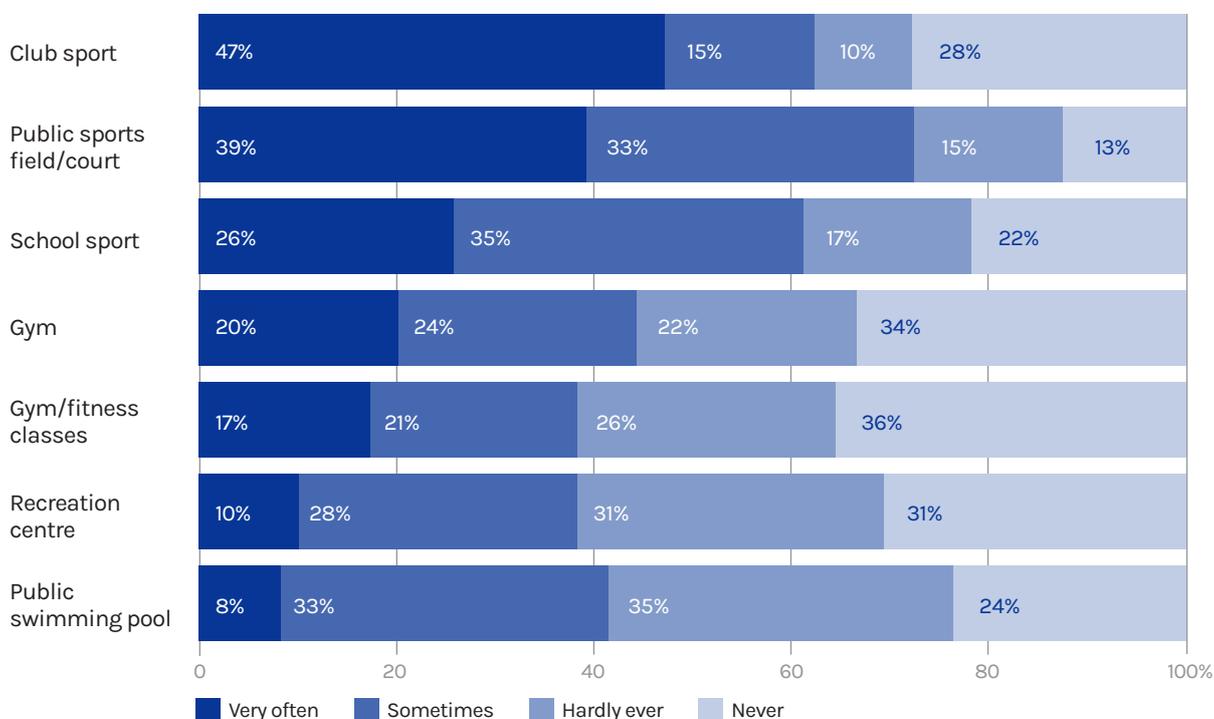
Public sports fields or courts were the most popular place for young people to go for fitness (71% 'very often' or 'sometimes' used them). Gyms were the second most popular place, and while 1 in 3 'never' use the gym,

many of those who do use gyms go 'very often' (25%). Students reported attending gym and fitness classes at similar rates to which they used gyms.

It was less common for students to report going to recreation centres and swimming pools, with over 60% reporting they 'hardly ever' or 'never' attend either.

This graph shows students most often use or do the following:

How often do you use or do the following?



What sports and fitness activities and facilities would young people like more access to?

Two thirds (66%) of students who participated in the poll reported wanting more access to gyms.

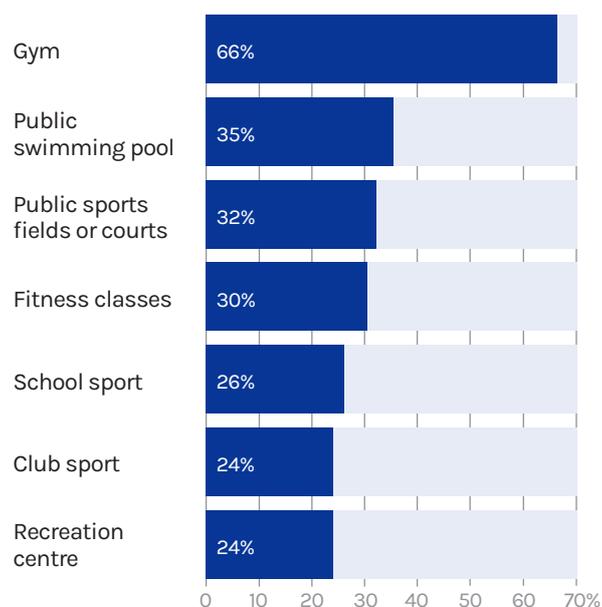
While students reported relatively low attendance at public swimming pools currently, 35% of students wanted more access to them.

Some of the reasons given for the current low attendance of young people at swimming pools included the following: 'pools close during cold seasons', 'pool memberships are very expensive', and the 'pool is old and needs refurbishment, plus if they have power shedding they have to close the pool'.

Almost a third of students (32%) reported wanting more access to public sports fields or courts and a similar number wanted more access to fitness classes (30%). One quarter (26%) wanted more access to school sport, and 24% wanted more access to club sport or recreation centres.

Low desire for more school and club sports may be because there are many students who are already participating in these fitness activities (62% play club sport and 61% play school sport 'very often' or 'sometimes').

What would you like more access to?



What makes it difficult for students to participate in sports and fitness activities?

Sports and fitness facilities and activities are too expensive.

- “ Prices and open times.” - Year 10
- “ The expense of the gym and fitness class makes it difficult for young teenagers on minimum wage.” - Year 11

There are no, or not enough, local options.

- “ How many there are, because it is always booked out.” - Year 10
- “ The fact there are no girls' soccer teams.” - Year 7
- “ They are few and far between and public courts are also rarely taken care of.” - Year 11
- “ Fitness classes are often at awkward times or are inaccessible entirely.” - Year 11

We aren't able to get there due to our age, access to transport, and/or location.

- “ Gyms are always too far away. There isn't a gym within a 30-minute drive, and I can't drive.” - Year 11
- “ Pools close during cold seasons. Gyms aren't in walking distance. Medical issues so I can't do sport.” - Year 10

We feel uncomfortable about other people watching us exercise.

- “ Going there and feeling awkward enough. I want to leave unless I'm with someone.” - Year 11

We aren't allowed to access some spaces.

- “ I have to be a certain age to use my local gym (I'm not old enough).” - Year 9
- “ Our school doesn't have Gym and the Public Gym is expensive and limited to age.” - Year 9

Around school, work, and family commitments, there isn't enough time to exercise.

- “ The school times mixing with the out of school sport times, as well as the homework, and the amount of tests to study for.” - Year 10

How would more access to sports and fitness facilities and activities help students' wellbeing?

We would have better mental health, feel happier and more confident about ourselves, be able to clear our minds, feel better more generally, and have higher self-esteem.

- “ It would help my mental wellbeing because I always feel better after exercising.” - Year 10
- “ It makes my mind think of something else, because I love sport and its peace.” - Year 7
- “ A good body good mind fitness isn't only your body, but also your mind.” - Year 7
- “ Definitely, my mental health is currently very stable, but I strongly believe that this is due to sport, and that sport can have a similar impact on everyone who participates in it willingly.” - Year 10
- “ I think it would because it would give people a way to express themselves.” - Year 9

We would have better physical health and become stronger and have improved fitness levels, helping us to improve in other sports we do, and to stay active and healthy.

- “ It would help my physical and mental [health] because I need to be fit for footy (AFL) and I want to improve my mental health, which doing anything fitness related helps with that.” - Year 11
- “ It would allow us to take a breather from school and academics that would also be beneficial to our bodies.” - Year 10

We would be able to socialise more easily and connect with our communities.

- “ I would be able to socialise easier with people.” - Year 6
- “ It would improve my fitness level, make me more relaxed and improve my sense of community.” - Year 11

We would be able to engage in fitness and exercise activities without worrying about the cost, and the price wouldn't be a barrier to our participation.

- “ Then I don't need to stress about how much something is going to cost me and I can just go out and enjoy working out.” - Year 10
- “ Cheaper. Have to choose between petrol money or membership.” - Year 12

We would be able to spend time outdoors and away from screens.

- “ I would have something to do instead of just staying home all the time.” - Year 10
- “ Yes, I would enjoy being physically active, instead of being in the library on our laptops.” - Year 11

For more information

For more information about Fitness for Free and other SA SRC campaigns, please contact Niav Andrews, Engagement and Participation Officer, at Niav.Andrews@sa.gov.au.